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SUBJECT: UNASUR COMMISSION HEAD SAYS LAST ROUND OF
COCHABAMBA MEETINGS BOUGHT TIME

REF: SANTIAGO 891 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Paul E. Simons for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Juan Gabriel Valdes, the head of the UNASUR commission to Bolivia told the Ambassador October 9 that the last round of meetings in Cochabamba had "for the short term" created a space to continue dialogue and prevented violence. While there was no accord, the government seemed committed to reaching one, although on terms that will allow it to impose its will on constitutional reform. The prefects, he judged, are casting about for excuses not to talk because, in the end, they believe the constitution is fundamentally flawed. Race and class help fuel the dispute but its key lies in the "naked conflict for power" and control over land and natural resources. Talks have bought "perhaps a month's time" until the vote on the plebescite, when the mass movements only nominally controlled by either side could take matters into their own hands. End summary.

¶2. (U) The Ambassador called October 9 on Juan Gabriel Valdes, named by President Bachelet, in her capacity as president pro tem of UNASUR, to lead the UNASUR commission charged with helping to help resolve the Bolivia crisis. E/Pol Counselor accompanied the Ambassador.

A Civilized Confrontation...

¶3. (C) Valdes said that events in Bolivia are part of a "historical" process that could still end in violence. But the October 5 talks in Cochabamba between the Morales government and the prefects had bought short-term relief. They had prevented violence and been conducted with some "respect" for the process of constitutional reform, for Morales, and for the prefects. The government appears to genuinely want to reach an accord although one ultimately favorable to its interests. Morales told the prefects that they should not be fighting "as you and I will be gone in a year and only the bishops will remain." On its face the government's insistence on a constitutional reform that would allow Morales "one reelection" does not appear so bad, Valdes mused. The problem is that Bolivia has no strong institutions in place to ensure that the reelection would only take place once.

¶4. (C) Both Morales and VP Garcia Linares had taken a reassuring line with the prefects at their October 5 meeting, with Morales talking of "mutual need" and Linares saying the government is willing to add a clause in the constitution recognizing autonomy, as well as engaging "in private talks" to modify/remove other clauses the prefects find objectionable. But as Santa Cruz prefect Costa told Valdes, he and other prefects cannot be seen to be negotiating away rights - especially "in private" - and still maintain their bona fides as opposition leaders. On the other side of the table, Morales is oscillating between advice offered by the moderate Garcia Linares and the "extremist" Minister of the Presidency. (Later in the conversation, Valdes noted that Costa had advised Morales that he "needs to be Mandela." At times, Valdes said, Morales is the angry, aggrieved indigenous leader. On other occasions "he can be Mandela," and was in Cochabamba October 5, acting as a conciliator reaching across class and race lines.)

...For the Time Being

¶5. (C) While talks had been cordial, no agreement was reached, with both sides still dug into respective positions. Valdes worried that the threat by the prefect of Oruro to bring 14,000 followers down to surround the parliament as the congress votes on constitutional reform could be a flash point. The government still needs seven votes in the Senate to effect its desired changes and was pushing some opposition leaders "hard" to get the necessary votes. Prefects, in turn, were throwing up "excuse after excuse" to justify

walking away from continued talks. Garcia Linares had been "brilliant" in shooting down opposition objections but, as one bishop told Valdes, the prefects don't want an agreement.

At end, Santa Cruz prefect Costa speaks for many of them when he describes the constitution, as he did to Morales, as "illegal, racist, and authoritarian."

¶6. (C) Valdes offered that rather than "authoritarian" the constitution could prove "anarchic" with provisions for three levels of autonomy (departmental, communal, and indigenous). Garcia Linares would like to negotiate these matters before a referendum and talks are underway in the congress. But the prefects are wary of government offers to negotiate "almost anything" so long as it is done privately. The prefects are insisting on public talks both to protect themselves but also because in the end they don't want to negotiate on certain matters. These principally revolve around land and natural resources, part of a "naked conflict over power." The prefects claim ownership over mineral rights, for example, something to which the central government "cannot agree," Valdes said, "as we would not here in Chile."

¶7. (C) Valdes worried as well that both Morales supporters, "in El Alto, for example," and those loyal to the various prefects were capable of violent action "uncontrolled" by their leaders. Both sides are "social movements" and once launched, they cannot be called back.

UNASUR on the Sidelines

¶8. (C) Valdes said that UNASUR has adopted a very cautious stance - it represents heads of states of South American countries and so cannot be seen to be taking sides or a formal role in negotiations. It does, however, continue to talk informally with all parties. What UNASUR has been able to accomplish, in concert with the other international observers, is to calm matters and decrease the likelihood of violence. Moreover, the UNASUR commission's specific role is to encourage and monitor the pace of dialogue. Right now, Valdes noted, "there is no dialogue, so no role." UNASUR can step in again, as necessary, should the risk of violence rematerialize. Valdes praised the efforts of the EU, particularly the French and British ambassadors who had

played a very visible but positive role. Both Morales and the prefects were uncomfortable with observers, each worried that their respective extremist branches would play poorly before international eyes. The Brazilians had also been proactive; "they are very influential" and balance the Venezuelans. Valdes also noted that the Cubans had been surprisingly constructive and that they were clearly in rivalry with the Venezuelans, "in Bolivia and elsewhere in Latin America." The Ambassador asked about the OAS and Valdes said it remained active in helping move forward technical talks.

Comment

19. (C) Valdes continues to lean towards Morales, although he is critical of steps taken by both sides. He remains confident that talks can eventually succeed; he reiterated public comments that with "another 48 hours" the Cochabamba talks could have concluded with a broad agreement. But he is clearly worried that time is short and that events could quickly spiral out of the control of moderates on both sides.

End comment.

SIMONS